

THE LABORATORY AS A PROPHYLACTIC MEASURE

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It is no easy matter, in these days of multiple and cheap communication between foreign countries, to maintain a close sanitary watch over all intending immigrants. Yet, it must be admitted that the system established at Hamburg, of keeping under observation until they embark all emigrants that sail from that port, is an ideal one; but we must remember that such a step entails no small expense and probably, not all European nations would be willing to follow the German example.

The usual method of sanitary inspection of passengers, immigrants or others, either at sea-ports or in some small town near the boundary line, is well known to all who have travelled. A rapid survey of each passenger, in some unsuitable building or on board the steamer or railway-car, looking out especially for some signs of eruptive fevers or general weakness, occasionally taking the pulse and rarely, the introduction of a thermometer, is as a rule, the sum total of the average sanitary inspection of passengers.

Who can tell with any degree of certainty that all those passengers so examined, are not sufferers of some latent pathological condition?

In the case of first-class or Pullman-car passengers, that is, persons of the well-to-do class, the danger from future trouble is less than with the poorer class, which usually travels in the steerage. The danger is less, not only because such travellers are more intelligent and know when they should call for medical aid, but also because they have the means of paying for such aid. In the case of the steerage or immigrant class of passengers the reverse is the case. Generally they are stupid and of course, badly off financially. It is for the latter class that measures must be taken, in order to prevent them bringing in diseases to the country where they intend to settle.

Before an immigrant is allowed to enter freely into a country he must first stay for a certain period of time at an immigration depot, where supposedly he is to be studied—physically at least—in order to determine if he be fit for admission.

The medical examination at the immigration stations should be carried out on more thorough lines than heretofore. Formerly it was sufficient to examine for trachoma, leprosy, small-pox or some disease of that sort, but no attempt was made to diagnose latent tuberculosis, quiescent malarial infection, and cholera spirillum—or typhoid bacillus-carrier.

It is here, at these stations, that a well equipped clinical laboratory could render most valuable service. Indeed, it could act as a prophylactic measure. Had it not been for such a laboratory, the health authorities of the State of New York recently would have been at their wits' end, to stamp out cholera.

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Instead, thanks to the laboratory, the passengers infected were correctly diagnosed and the non-infected were allowed to proceed without further molestations.

The routine examination of the immigrants' feces, at least once, might reveal for example, the Eberth bacillus or the ova of *uncinaria*.

I could quote two cases in my experience, which came under the notice of our Commission for Infectious Diseases, and which, or rather, the failure to do so, illustrate the value of such timely examination, and advisability of the procedure.

One of the cases was that of a young Spanish girl, who a few days after her arrival from Spain, was taken sick. Several erroneous diagnoses were made and of course, faulty treatment given. She was finally taken to "Las Animas" Hospital, and died there. A few minutes before her death the microscope revealed in this patient's excreta, a considerable number of the ova of *ascarides lumbricoides*.

The other case was that of a Spanish laborer, a recently arrived immigrant. A few weeks after his coming, he was brought to "Las Animas" Hospital and died before proper treatment could be given him. Here again, the microscope helped in the diagnosis, because a few hours before the end, the presence of *amoebae* in the excreta were shown microscopically.

I am fully convinced, that had those two cases been subjected to a thorough clinical and laboratory examination at the immigration station, those deaths at least, might have been averted. But in this connection, one point should not be overlooked, and it is, that not only should laboratories be established at quarantine or immigration stations, but they should have proper and efficient employees to carry on the work in the best scientific manner. This is a question that deserves our earnest attention as health officials, because our duty should be to lean more to the prevention of disease, than to lessen mortality and morbidity rates.

All nations take precautions against undesirable immigration, both from the moral as well as, from the physical standpoint. The anarchist, who is considered a moral wreck, because he brings the germs of social discord and dissolution; and the weak immigrant, who is a physical wreck, because he is incapable of having a robust progeny. Both are undesirable. I further hold that the same objection should be raised against those individuals, healthy in appearance, but who are nevertheless physiological wrecks, because laboratory methods have shown, that they carry within themselves pathogenic germs, which are harmful to the community.